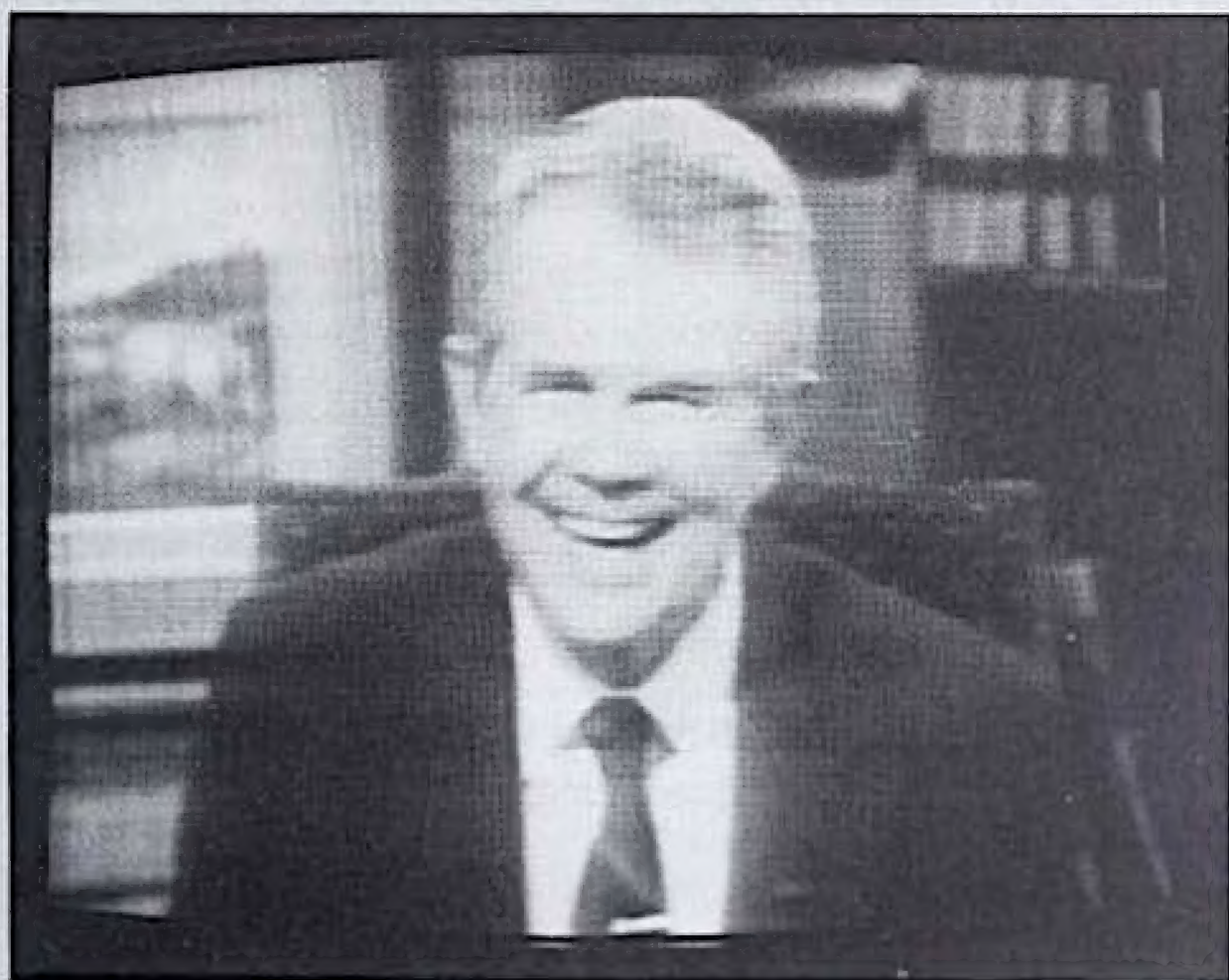


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# THE INDEPENDENT



**The  
Popular  
Appeal  
of  
Television's  
Right  
Reverends**



# Why Christian Television Is Good TV

Julia Lesage

*Editor's note: Julia Lesage and Trinh T. Minh-ha's articles in this issue continue a series of papers and transcribed talks delivered at ViewPoints: A Conference on Women, Culture, and Public Media held at Hunter College in New York City on November 8 and 9, 1986 [see our January/February 1987 and April 1987 issues]. This national conference was independently organized by a committee of women involved in film, video, and photography (including The Independent editor Martha Gever and associate editor Renee Tajima), cosponsored by Women Make Movies and Hunter College Women's Studies Department, and funded by the New York State Council on the Arts and the New York Council on the Humanities. Trinh's paper was delivered at the panel "Cracking the Media Mystique: Images and Politics," and Lesage's at "The Subject of Politics: Women and Right-Wing Media" panel.*

On the surface, the worst thing about Christian television seems to be its rigid anti-abortion stance and its institutional support for the political agenda of the New Right, especially for the *contras*. Many leftists and feminists label Christian television "right-wing" media and never watch it, or they do watch it and immediately reject it. However, an easy pejorative encourages intellectual laziness when it allows us to dislike a media phenomenon and not consider that phenomenon either respectfully or analytically.

Both when viewing and when writing about television, it is useful to carry on an interior monologue noting TV's class and gender aspects. There is an implied hierarchy of value among genres that corresponds to our social hierarchy. For example, women have been identified as the primary viewers of soap operas and daytime television; men as watchers of sports. However, in ordinary conversation "sports" does not bear the negative connotation that "the soap opera" or "the game show" frequently do. In class terms, the news and public television serve people who finished high school. CBN (the Christian Broadcasting

Network) with *The 700 Club* show, and the PTL (Praise the Lord) broadcasting network with *The Jim and Tammy Bakker Show*, are the white, working-class networks.

Black Christian television, primarily black preaching and gospel singing, has a different relation to its regular viewers. Followers of national (white) religious broadcasting may see black evangelism as confirmation of the rightness of their shared Christian faith, or they may dismiss black Christian television as demagogic (Jesse Jackson), crassly opportunistic (Reverend Ike), or just old-fashioned. Catholic television broadcasting has not gotten beyond an abysmal talking heads format with clerics and authorities telling viewers what to think, and there are few Jewish shows. In addition, there are many local and regional Christian stations and shows, broadcast primarily on cable TV. Here I will analyze mostly the national cable networks, CBN and PTL, and mostly their weekday shows, but I'll talk a little bit about the weekend preachers and a little about the gospel and a little about Jerry Falwell, who seems to be losing power and stands in the periphery.

Christian evangelists, with wisdom accumulated from a populist preaching tradition, have a good sense of what audiences in a home environment expect and want from the medium of television. And a backward stand on reproductive rights or foreign policy are not the worst things about Christian television. Worse yet are the widespread ideological assumptions—in this case, the assent to compulsory heterosexuality and xenophobia—that conform to television discourse in general in the U.S.

A major task of ideology, on the unconscious level, is to signal and constantly define the traits of who is supposed to be the other and who is acceptable as one of us. The "us" targeted as a viewership for Christian TV is primarily white working-class. Thus, homophobia and racism are deep structuring principles in Christian television, only they are more visible to liberal middle-class viewers there than in the rest of the intellectual/communications apparatus. Intellectuals who like to watch the news may think that Christian broadcasting is the most acute locus of TV racism, if they notice how racist television is. Yet if we look at both the subject matter and the style of network news and then at Christian broadcasting, we would see the same kind of racism in each.



Jimmy Swaggart: "Back about six months ago God told me, 'Take the crusades to other countries that have little opportunity to hear—at least on a large scale—the gospel of Jesus Christ, and I will give you a move of God that few have seen.' We've done that."



"But when we did all this, our expenses went up about 30 or 35 percent. It had to be. We had to have all kinds of equipment for television. But God told me to do it. I don't have a choice.... You don't have a choice either. I'm pleading with you to say yes. You can't say no."



THE BRUTE TAMED

One of the major gratifications daytime Christian television offers is the melodramatic gratification, aimed at women in the home, which I call "the brute tamed." Everyday you can see men crying. They confess. They repent. They change. They become moral. They become family men. For many women, especially where the husband is spending his money on booze and going out with the boys, this vision of economic and familial sobriety is not only a pleasurable goal to imagine, its enactment would come about through the wife's moral force and would be an index of her social/personal control.

In fact, in a lot of Christian working-class families this kind of "moral unity" is the goal. A wife may say to her husband, "Now, you have to come to church on Sunday with me and the kids." What this means is, "You'll come to church with me and the kids on Sunday, and you'll hand me your paycheck, and the community will see that we're a family together." Many social and personal ideals cohere in this image. Seeing this scenario day after day offers the same kind of appeal, let's say, that the Women's Christian Temperance Union originally had in Chicago.

Often the black preachers are openly critical of family politics, recognizing how alcoholism and male philandering weaken the community. Here are the words of Dr. Frederick K. C. Price, who told the Sunday audience of *The Christian Family* this:

Sometimes men just take and take and take all the time. You'll tip a valet and a waitress, but *she* does more for you. Buy her a little something and make it something nice.

You guys always say, "I gotta have time alone, spend time with the boys. Now, honey, hush." You just want a cook and sex machine.

You could go out at night with mutual consent between the two of you. Don't go out jawing and then leaving her three hours alone, or saying you're going out for an hour and then coming back three hours later. You know, if you come back with a blonde hair on your coat, and even if it just blew off onto your coat, that's gonna cause a lot of bad fantasies in your house.



Jerry Falwell issues his "New Emancipation Proclamation" during his sermon on the Sunday morning *Old Time Gospel Hour*. "Without a doubt, abortion is the slavery of the day in which we live. It's the issue that if we do not win it we do not deserve to survive."

A very common family pattern in my neighborhood, often among Latino and black families, is that the men just go out at night. They say they're going for an hour and then come in at four or five in the morning, maybe drunk. They usually haven't gone out with women but out with the boys. And they expect food to be prepared for them whenever it is that they are at home. That particular family drama—or melodrama—doesn't appear on soap operas, which deal with upper middle-class problems such as going to see your lawyer or therapist or partner in adultery in rich settings and in some very dramatic way. In soap operas, a middle-class version of the above family pattern does appear. The man will call home to say he's working late at the office or meeting a client for dinner. Then the narrative presents an episode in which he has a prearranged tryst with his "woman on the side."

BODY LANGUAGE, SETS

To analyze Christian television we must deal with real class issues. In my case, it is painful for me as a feminist to admit the class bias that we have projected onto others, even if we tried to avoid such a bias in our political programs and intellectual work. In the early part of the women's movement, especially the white feminist movement, we failed to acknowledge that there were different dress codes among us. By not wearing a girdle and by dressing in slacks and a shirt, I project a specific class identity, as do most of the white women at the Viewpoints Conference—media-makers, critics, artists. We announce publicly that we are downwardly mobile, middle-class women, who can afford to dress in this very casual way. Most black women don't dress like this, nor do most trade union women, if they are gathering in public for a meeting. Many, if not most, women in the U.S. cherish a notion of dressing up in public or dressing up out of respect for other people. Blacks were forced to dress in rags during slavery; if lucky, perhaps they could dress in the masters' castoff finery for church services. They do not have a legacy of pride in dressing down. And if you look at the visual history of trade unions in the United States, photographs of strikes show the workers, both men and women, demonstrating while wearing their best clothes.



Falwell unveils the plans for his proposed headquarters of a chain of Liberty Godparent Homes for unwed, pregnant women, to be built on the campus of Liberty University in Lynchburg, Virginia: "I'd like my friends at home watching my television, I'd like you to call this toll free number and say, 'Jerry, I'll be a masterbuilder. I'll pledge \$10,000.'"



When we see women as moderators or in the audience on Christian television, their self-presentation conveys their adherence to the ideal of dressing up in public. Before the moderators appeared on television, these women went to the beauty shop. They had their hair put up in rollers and sat under the dryer and then had it combed out and styled. To go out to a public event, they wear nylons and low heels, not spikes, and they use coordinated costume jewelry, very often a string of fake pearls and big earrings. They wear makeup—base, powder, blusher, lipstick, and a little mascara. Usually they have on a tailored skirt with a feminine suit jacket and dressy blouse, but never slacks, and I always see evidence of a girdle. Obviously I have not adopted that mode of dress, even for political purposes. But I understand that I give off very specific signals about my class position, as does everyone else. Just by looking at us, most people would know immediately that we feminist media women, especially the white women, have chosen to do nonalienated labor and be downwardly mobile economically. We don't look like women who are working on Wall Street, for example, and we don't look like women who have to dress up for a job.

The uniform of jeans and a sweatshirt, worn by a woman over age 25 in public space, offers a statement to others. Other people "read" much about us visually. In fact, this standard dress code of the "feminist" is used as a pejorative icon on Christian television, where our image is often contrasted to the image of all other "normal" women. So even if we have very good reasons not to change our mode of dress, we should stop being naive about the image that we have always signalled—from the very inception of the feminist movement.

Personally, I learn something about my own upbringing and rebellions by analyzing how Christian television plays off the utopian aspects of working-class ideology, for example, the desire for respectability. To dress and act in an orderly way, to be personally neat and clean, and to have a house that is neat and clean signals to the community, "I am a respectable person. We are a respectable family." I rebelled against the stifling narrowness of seeing women's role primarily as the maintainer of the family members' and the furniture's "neatness." But I know, from my conflicts with my family, that physically and socially I publicly signalled my rebellion, and that all the visible indices of my rebellion made my mother very distressed.

On Christian television, many of the daytime programs have a living room set, and that set is usually furnished in classical, "old rich," good taste. It has more expensive furniture than any viewer could usually afford. The living room set evokes emotions associated with both Father and Mother. Only the riches a woman might get by virtue of her father or husband's class status would allow her to have such a living room. Pat Robertson often uses such a place from which to speak to his public. In this sense, the set is patriarchal.

However, a living room still represents the home, mom's turf. And in this space "witnesses" tell how their faith in Jesus let them be delivered from acute personal suffering, especially vices that destroyed their capacity for personal love and family responsibility. The woman who was raped can tell how she hated the child who reminded her of the rapist and how she overdosed on tranquilizers. The former convict can tell how he saw his mother, a prostitute, take in clients. The set, now often with a woman interviewer, becomes the site of deeply personal "sharing."

Politicians in the U.S. have always known to use such a set, often for a "fireside chat." This kind of image proclaims, "We're bringing public space into your living room, and we're going to interpret it in an orderly way, so you can absorb it and it will be palatable to you." The upper-middle-class living room set plays a central role in Christian television. With its utopian, patriarchal cultural legitimacy and its "motherly" emotional appeal, it provides a richly associative image and establishes emotionally a certain mental "path." On a political level, this constant set facilitates the New Right's ability to interpret the public sphere for its viewers. The emotional shaping of the message, more than any explicit political content, gives the right wing discourse presented by Christian television its ideological staying power. It is in this sense that I find Christian broadcasting "effective television," for it is so finely tuned to the emotions con-



**CBN News economic correspondent Bruce Page reports: "The Democrats now control both houses of Congress for the first time during the Reagan administration, and they're determined to flex their political muscle. And this may be the issue to do it: raise taxes."**

veyed by its iconography.

Within Christian television itself, there are class differences in the targeted audience. If Pat Robertson's *The 700 Club* seems aimed at the lower-middle-class or the craft union level of the working-class, Jim and Tammy Bakker present themselves and their "world" as by and for down-home folk. Jim and Tammy have built a Christian theme park called Heritage USA, and the first thing they put up there to conduct their ministry was a high-tech broadcasting facility. If you think of it from the perspective of a working-class family, the notion of going to a theme park for a Christian vacation isn't so bad. The adults and older teenagers would have the intellectual prestige of studying, even if only the Bible. The smaller kids would not plague their parents to buy a lot of junk. They wouldn't see excessive alcohol consumed either, which means a lot to families on vacation. And each night there would be large scale entertainment, such as a variety show.

Furthermore, if you go to the Christian theme park or if you go to any of the preachers and their big revivals—such as those of Jimmy Swaggart—you can gain not only the status of repenting but of getting on TV as you repent. People like being seen on TV, especially if they can gratify their superego and perform for the camera in the service of a higher moral cause (some forms of *jouissance*, or extreme pleasure, such as being on the winning side at a sports event or getting saved, are more morally acceptable than others and thus likely to be seen on television over and over again; others, such as coming, are relegated to the x-rated videocassette market).

Furthermore, at the revivals, viewers see a wide variety of faces, physiognomies, weights, and body types. The people attending a religious event dress up in public, but they still bear the traces of the whole variety of working-class people who are visually underrepresented on television. When working-class people watch soap operas, they see upper-middle-class characters. If white working-class viewers enjoy seeing their "own" on TV, they can do so constantly on Christian television.

#### **POLLUTION AND PURIFICATION RITUALS**

Christian television networks hold out to the white working-class a dream that they, via leaders such as Falwell and Robertson, have a class potential for action and power: "You people sitting in your living rooms, send me your widow's mite, and we'll convert it into political power." That's one of the hopes people have clung to in the Reagan era. Christian television particularly exploits women's isolation in the home and promises, "Send me your money, and I'll help you out right there with your problems at home." Again, as with Hitler's fascism, a regressive political platform can be built upon a utopian, working-class sensibility.

Such a utopian sensibility, which most of us would reject as disastrous in its consequences, can be analyzed in anthropological terms. Applying Mary Douglas' notions of pollution in *Purity and Danger*, it is useful to look first at our own utopian ideals. In other words, many of us dislike Reagan, dislike the fascism that we see around us, dislike urban pollution



and nuclear pollution. We interpret these things as a kind of pollution in our society, and we often even use the word "pollution." When we imagine our ideal revolutionary culture, we imagine our society rid of this, purified of that—e.g., society would be better if we could drink clean water and had clean air. In anthropological terms these goals which we assent to represent the larger social purification rituals of the feminist movement and the left. When Martin Luther King, Jr. proclaimed, "I have a dream," he evoked the purity of children's race-free consciousness as an ideal, and the general assent to that ideal gave the civil rights movement, and now more broadly what we would call the progressive movement, its cohesiveness.

Very different ideals of social purity and different wars on social pollution inform Christian television and give its audience political cohesiveness. On Christian television, the pollution is drugs, the breakdown of the family, AIDS and gayness. Even more than with its resolute opposition to abortion, the right maintains consensus about the evils of homosexuality. Christian television gives testimonials about "badness" over and over again. What motivates this dominant narrative strategy is the conviction that both society and individuals can go from pollution to purification. Then, because it is the Reagan era, Christians can found a new conservative social order. If we are honest, we would acknowledge that we too need such an emotional/social ritual. If I put into the category of "badness" fascism, Reagan, urban pollution, acid rain—i.e., put lots of things we don't like in there—then we could say we wanted our society to be purified of those things in the same way that the right wing wants to purify society of its list of bad things, and we would seek out cultural events that assured us of cultural cohesion around our goals.

#### GENDER AND FAMILY ROLES

I'm fascinated by *The Jim and Tammy Bakker Show* and other offerings that can be seen on daytime Christian television, because daytime Christian television has its own vision of women's turf. Women-oriented fare here looks more working-class than, let's say, it does on the game show, which tantalizes viewers with expensive consumer items, or on soap operas, where the characters' adventures are enacted in an incredibly upper-middle-class environment. Daytime Christian television offers fashion shows, diet shows with health tips, even aerobics in modest dress. Furthermore, such television gives a specific pitch to anyone suffering from loneliness. For example, Oral Roberts asks elderly women to contribute their widow's mite as he makes them feel that they are also contributing to a community.

Television in general, indeed, all the mass media surrounding us—TV, advertising, and film—doesn't suffer gender role confusion, even in a film about the transvestite or the transsexual or the lesbian mother or the gay man with AIDS. Women and children will always appear with clearly defined feminine and childlike roles and so will doctors or cops with clearly defined masculine roles. These folk who face no gender role confusion in the narrative indicate that the rest of the world is comfortably ensconced in its role status, even if a story may deal with some topic that points to gender confusion. In Christian television, especially daytime television, women's gender roles are merely set out as given and reflect working-class notions of ideal femininity.

But daytime Christian television does set out to correct roles gone astray and it does so overtly. If gender roles can be taken for granted, family roles cannot. The family is in a mess, and in the Christian narrative (informing its nonfiction as well as fiction programs), family roles get straightened out over and over again. Of course, the soap opera also offers the narrative pleasure of straightening out family role confusion, but as Christian television acknowledges the breakdown of the family and ongoing family tensions, it also offers the reassuring pleasure of seeing either women as moral force or the Bible as moral force. In other words, it promises that there will be some force intervening to pull everyone back together.

The right shares a consensus about gayness as pollution. If we want to fight the right on gender issues, we have to speak out for an explicitly pro-homosexual position whenever the subject of AIDS is discussed. We



Pat Robertson editorializes: "The problem we're facing is that everybody wants a little something. Over 50 percent get something from the federal government. And that means that there's got to be a political will someplace in America to say, 'We'll give up a little of ours, if you give up a little of yours.'... You've got to say, 'All right, we believe that the strength of America is greater than my little problem.'... We've got to make it on our own in the private sector."

can't let this discussion slip into an easy homophobia. However, among politically conservative women, abortion is a disputed issue. It is not openly disputed ideologically, but whenever it comes up for a referendum, in the secrecy of the voting booth, people vote against such referenda. Abortion itself has not gone away, and we know that many women get abortions secretly for themselves and their daughters. Since the first right to go in the Reagan era was health care for poor women, free abortion disappeared as an active political issue, so the fight for reproductive rights must be joined to the fight for adequate health care under capitalism. We should keep that in mind very clearly when we see the constant diatribe against abortion on Christian television.

On the other hand the ERA is not a disputed issue, either on Christian television or among white working-class housewives. In October 1986, I was fascinated to see *The 700 Club's* depiction of the ERA referendum coming up in Vermont. Many of the ERA supporters were shown to look like me—a heavy woman who wears slacks but no girdle. In iconographic terms, that was obviously intended to be an insulting image of a feminist. Other speakers in support of the ERA were shown as very young women (too young to lead) while the women fighting the ERA were middle-aged. These women wore suits and were nicely dressed by Christian TV standards. And the report used people-on-the-street interviews, which indicated, as always happens on *The 700 Club*, "We know there are other views out there." The interviews spoke for and against the ERA. But then we see a man interviewed about ERA who says, "I don't know." The male authority figure's voice comes back later in the program and indicates, "You just don't know what would happen if we passed ERA." The fear of future gender role confusion was enough to motivate voters to vote no.

#### RACISM

Television in the U.S. is even more racist than it is sexist. The blacks who get on television are tidy, de-ethnicized, and upwardly mobile, or they were formerly untidy and are now repentant, or they are just plain vicious and chaotic. The news presents most foreigners as vicious and chaotic—e.g., "illegal aliens."

The most fascinating black person on "white folks'" Christian television is the moderator on *The 700 Club*, Ben Kinchlow. Kinchlow wears suits that would put an executive in the *Fortune* top 100 to shame. Everyday he comes on with the most elaborate and expensive three-piece suit, with ties that must have cost \$150 each. It's really fascinating, because we can always find this kind of figure emerging on television, a person fitting into the middle-class mold so easily who just happens to have a black skin. We saw this elsewhere when publishers just put black faces but not black culture in *Dick and Jane* readers in response to community protests about racism in grade school primers.

Christian television tries and convicts us on the level of imagery more



than on the level of argumentation. In this way, it uses the connotative aspects of imagery in a specifically "law and order" kind of way. *The 700 Club*, which often uses a news format, presents images of demonstrations, gay liberation, and youth that look like images we might use in our own media. Yet if a shot of two people of the same sex hugging is positive in our media, its very appearance on Christian television indicates "social chaos deriving from moral chaos." Similarly, various aspects of youth culture, often rock music lyrics, become examples of "satanism today."

Here we must add all the "feed the poor" images of Africa. Advocating "humanitarianism" cuts short the discussion of basic human rights, especially for black people, and it refuses an analysis of causes, especially when the cause of world hunger is imperialism. Humanitarianism will always treat the symptoms of "tragic suffering" but never effect a cure. Humanitarianism is an ideological construct that eases the consciences of the rich, but we do not always identify it in its various manifestations: e.g., the March of Dimes, Jerry's kids, Bob Geldof, EST's hunger project.

Beyond calling for humanitarian aid for starving Africans, the images of Africa and the "do good" message of the television missionaries hide the specific ties that many fundamentalist religious groups working in the third world have to the CIA. Not only do these groups receive material support from the U.S. government, but in the field they preach a "depoliticizing" religion. I saw this in Nicaragua where "Render unto Caesar what is Caesar's, and render unto God what is God's" becomes just "Turn to God." There is an ideological battle within the religious rhetoric, for while liberation theology in the third world is preaching that the poor



Co-host Denuda Soderman and guests on the living room set for *The 700 Club*: "Still ahead, adopting children: the obstacles, hardships, and answers."

have a religious right and duty to live as whole people, the evangelist groups preach removing one's attention from earthly concerns.

At the same time that I denounce these groups' ties to U.S. foreign policy interests, I also must point out that they have had television shows playing in many areas throughout the world for years, and have thought out many issues involved in creating effective cross-cultural media. For example, Jimmy Swaggart preaches around the world, and his show often comes to us from a stadium in South America filled with thousands of people. He is a fine actor and puts on a great show. He preaches damnation and gives a colorful picture of the world's evils, he builds up a sweat and loosens his tie, and then he prays as God's grace gently falls upon the repentant. Most important, when he preaches in South America, he always has a Spanish-speaking preacher on stage doing simultaneous translation, and that preacher is *as good an actor as he is*.

Such respect for both performance and linguistic competency should teach those of us who do solidarity media in the U.S. a lesson. Consider all the voiceovers you have heard in solidarity films and all the slide shows you've gone to where someone tells you in their own everyday speech, "And then this woman told me...." Many times when we do a voiceover, we just plunk down a translation in a "reading," not an "acting," voice. For the sake of convenience, at the editing stage either

we or one of our friends read that translation into a microphone. It is hard to conduct tryouts and rehearse actors so as to approximate the tone and flavor of the original speaker. We often do not think about issues of translation in as respectful a way as does, let's say, *The PTL Club*, which I've seen in South America. The Spanish version of the program does not assume its viewers are facile readers and would stay with a television program with subtitles (i.e., middle-class viewers). It uses excellently acted voiceovers in Spanish. Christian television pays attention to the details of "television translation."

#### THE 700 CLUB

*The 700 Club* has a magazine format, showing different types of material, including different types of prayer sessions, in its daily show, which is broadcast several times a day and on several different cable networks. It often has segments of reportage that look like the news. Making "news," for example, was Rock Hudson's deathbed conversion by one of his fundamentalist nurses. Similarly, in the "Walker spy story" in October 1987, the Walkers were turned in by one of their daughters, a woman who was a *700 Club* viewer. In another instance, reportage that looked like the news and Pat Robertson's own commentary explained at length the problems faced by a man named Orwell in Texas, who had made national news when it was discovered that he had physically abused the students at his Baptist boys' school, a place to which judges also regularly remanded delinquent youth for reform. Robertson took time to valorize this case because, in fact, one of the political victories of the religious Right in certain court cases has been around issues of education and religious freedom. He criticized the degree to which the state controls the education of children.

By my standards, Robertson's time on the air is dull. Far livelier are the reportage segments that are a mixture of news and soap opera. Often a guest in the studio, the upper-middle-class living room set, will tell a story about their past. The story will be illustrated with location shooting, the guest seen outdoors, line drawings and sketches (like a courtroom scene on the news, sketched by "our court reporter"), and dramatic reenactments. For example, a Latino man dressed in a suit tells that he had been an addict and pusher. We see scenes of him in prison, where a visitor comes to read him the Bible, "dialogue" with him, and help him to Jesus. Usually, the studio witness will say, "And at that point, I was free of drugs (or alcohol or gambling)." Although Christian television does not usually advocate seeing a psychologist, it still pays its cultural debt to Freud by giving explanations of childhood trauma to account for current vice. For example, the ex-convict's father had been a pusher who led his son into the world of drugs.

The dramatic reenactment is obviously theatrical but is simply inserted into the witness' story. Its theatricality and the contrast between two types of discourse are never commented upon. As a woman tells how she was on drugs, you see a shot of a woman in a bathroom putting pills in her mouth. In a sense, mainstream news uses a similar manipulative tactic. Its visual images do no more than illustrate an authoritative commentary and add emotional spice. And mainstream news is less overtly theatrical. When I see somebody on *The 700 Club* telling their story along with a dramatic reenactment of them going to the medicine cabinet for pills, it seems a more honest iconographic representation than what the news offers. Our hegemonic discourse is Manichean, interpreting social process in terms of good and evil and not in terms of interacting contradictions. In this particular case, we can see in the similarity of sound/image relations across genres that there is little difference between melodrama and the news.

The same program that depicted the struggle around the ERA in Vermont had as its other "news" segments a report on Halloween as satanic (including modern day witches, who look in physical appearance like the "feminist" type I described earlier, and an interview with Z. Budapest, a self-proclaimed feminist witch). To contrast and offer an image of a more ideal woman, a financial advisor on Wall Street told how she left a Bible out on her desk when she met with clients. This was followed with



retarded because they were good workers.

The "news" here on *The 700 Club* sets out political issues mixed in with personal issues mixed in with soap opera, but it deals with things we don't otherwise see on television. In other words, the retarded do vote and do work, but some of us on the left don't even think of the retarded as worthy citizens to appeal to; they rarely enter the space of our imagination. Yet having no psychic space to think about something, either in the media or in the mind, is the principle ideological mechanism in our culture that maintains sexism and racism and all the other -isms. Here, the political motivation of the segment seemed to underscore that the genial Christian employer would have his workers' gratitude and confidence and thus could deliver up x number of votes. If we look at other *700 Club* segments, we'll find many similar "political" tactics but usually mixed in with utopian elements. What other space do the retarded have on television?

#### PERSUASION TACTICS

I have written extensively on Brecht and Godard and appreciate arguments about the mass media's emotional seductiveness. But it's time for us to reconsider television's emotional appeal, for what, in fact, would it mean to make activist media without such appeal? We can see that Christian television has developed, at great expense, a fine emotional "hook." Since every TV preacher gives a pitch for money, it is useful to analyze these pitches for their persuasion tactics. First of all, when the money's collected, people always get something, such as a cassette tape, back in the mail. Most significantly, the person's name goes on the mailing list. (According to a friend who sends out occasionally for literature, you'll be pulled from *The 700 Club*'s list if they don't hear from you several times a year.)

Furthermore, the phone bank service (people will pray with you) is supported on screen by a narrative device that I have seen only on Christian television. Every so often the preacher will deliver an incredibly intense direct address to the TV viewers by talking straight to the camera: "Close your eyes. Pray with me. Jesus is with you. Kneel by your television set." Collapsing distance like this presumes the material reality of TV preaching and saving souls over the airwaves. In fact, people must be at home alone if they follow these instructions, because I cannot imagine suddenly kneeling and praying in front of other family members. So the preacher makes a calculated appeal to the lonely. Such instructions are often followed with words like, "Call me, and tell me how you felt. There'll be someone here to talk to you." The phone call is just to talk to a warm and caring voice and tell how you felt. But then, of course, you will be asked for money. (There was a skirmish for about a year during which time toll-free numbers were dropped from the most popular shows such as Falwell's because some gay newspapers had printed the toll-free numbers with suggestions that readers call in and give false pledges. One enterprising radical even had his computer continuously calling and hanging up. I do not know about either the legal or logistical issues but



"One day, just after shooting up, Jim pulled over to the roadside and asked the Lord to help him. That night, alone in his room, he watched *The 700 Club* and found the answer to his prayer."



Ben Kinchlow: "Father, we come to you in the name of Jesus for a miraculous intervention in the life of Danielle. We bind up the angel of death, and we speak to that tumor in the name of Jesus. We command to begin to dissolve now...in Jesus' name."

have observed that most Christian television programs have toll-free numbers back again.)

Television spectacle has the voice of patriarchy behind it. Male experts intone the ads; the news relies on the Pentagon. Ted Koppel and Phil Donahue play the fair-minded liberal dads. Christian television has, as one of its internal contradictions, a perpetual conflict between Daddies, and that conflict is often enacted in the individual Daddy's TV style. Pat Robertson is on the political ascendancy, and his media is polished. He's leaving his role as a preacher to become much more the news moderator, a sort of Ted Koppel type, but he still leads his Bible seminars. Jerry Falwell is on the decline nationally and has gone back to be the head of an evangelical university in his old hometown in Virginia. Jim Bakker regularly complains about being turned in to the authorities by other preachers for tax evasion, and his and Tammy's ever expanding theme park is always deep in debt.

Both the pitches for money and the pitches for salvation are shaped by similar rhetorical devices. The preachers use repetition, a regular cadence, and a certain kind of rhetorical speaking voice. In a pattern which is familiar to both teachers of the retarded and women trying to teach men about sexism, the preachers set out the tasks for the audience in terms of very small steps. Secretaries deal with bosses this way, as do parents with children, so the tone is not uncommon to us. It just does not seem very adult. Yet to present a task in terms of very small steps, ones almost effortlessly accomplished, is a useful tactic for progressive direct mail campaigns. Any time you send out a mailing, you should enclose three postcards addressed to Congresspeople or the President which are all filled out, both front and back. People only have to sign their name, put on a stamp, and mail the card. The result is that anybody who has taken this kind of small step toward your cause thereafter identifies with it. Greenpeace taught me this tactic. A mailing from Greenpeace always includes postcards. This powerful persuasion tactic of asking someone to do something that takes no effort at all assumes that even the lazy can be stimulated to commitment to an organized effort.

To analyze one of Jimmy Swaggart's sermons in detail will indicate the kind of showmanship and rhetorical mastery which revivalist preachers have passed on through generations and which they are now effectively applying to television. In a sermon in a soccer stadium in Buenos Aires, he first gave the crowd the details of the venality that led to damnation, then he told them that no institution could save them, only the Lord's sweet grace raining upon them. At that point he said to them as they were all crying and weeping, "Now raise your hand...." Here was the first small step; it's easy to raise your hand. Next, still in the imperative mode (you give imperatives like this to children and distraught sick people), Swaggart said, "Now step down to the front...." People had a distance to go to get down from the stands into the soccer stadium's playing field. "Now step down to the front, so the whole world can know how many have come to Jesus..." The people going down to the preacher's platform knew that they would be on television. They were crying, and they held



those hands up, and they kept walking down there in a crowd. Then Swaggart said, "We're waiting for you. God is waiting for you. Come on right now. You're all washed clean, free of darkness."

At that point, Swaggart addressed the camera to speak to us at home: "It's for you. Your name is on this service. I want you on TV to pray with me." Then, "Repeat." As he encouraged viewers to repeat some phrase, even if only mentally, it moved them to take a step to follow his line. Similarly Jerry Falwell said, in a verbal series that reflected the increasing commitment he desired from his viewers, "Write me a letter. Join our prayer. Give me a vote of confidence. Send a check."

## EMOTION

Ever since the high-culture lovers of the Frankfurt School condemned mass culture as capitalist and manipulative, leftists have found it convenient to condemn first Hollywood film and later television. But a lot of us have that set going all the time. I like television because it comes into my home, and I can turn it on and have the sense of voices talking even if I plan to be in another room. As Elayne Rapping says in *The Looking Glass World of Nonfiction TV*, "The social role of television, in its broadest sense, is to provide that lost sense of community integrity in a fragmented world." Rapping asserts that we now use television to create this communal sense synthetically because of capitalist economic structures. However, I've also seen a good amount of communist television, and I'm not sure that the communists know any better what it is that people want out of television. I think that people use television like a household friend. They want it to deliver up emotion. People like television's effect of live reality. They like the immediacy of speech. In Christian television, such as *The PTL Club*, every so often a segue reveals how carefully calculated the "reality effect" is. In other words, you may see people sitting around the living room set jawing about the topic of the day, whatever it was, maybe incest, maybe films. Then one of them will say, "That is the bliss of coming to Jesus. And now so and so will sing to you about the bliss of coming to Jesus." Only a sophisticated media viewer will realize, when such segues come, how calculated this all was—the move from live speech to the spectacle of singing.

Jim Bakker capitalizes on the immediacy of live presentation. He and Tammy love to go around and show you the latest building going up in Heritage USA. Jim likes to walk in front of a camera person doing hand-held work to show you backstage life. Now, for me as a woman viewer, I find it fascinating to see how the backstage work is managed and run mostly by women: women doing makeup and women running computers. It's a visual symbol of how women keep these big media empires going.

What's most effective about Christian television is the same thing that is most effective about network news. It has little to do with the delivery of information and much more to do with a kind of right brain, emotional structuring of how to feel about social issues. We soon forget a program's details. What remains are the kind of symbolic events and the feelings which adhere to them which we experience in dreams. In this way, for example, Christian television structures how to think about abortions. Many working-class women who mouth pro-life ideology have had abortions, their daughters have had abortions and the Christian parents have paid for it. But the television program gives a dream structure in

which to dream your abortion forever after.

And it gives a dream structure in which to dream terrorism. And the dream structure in which to dream communism. And the dream image of the few acceptable, tidy, middle-class, upwardly mobile, well-coiffed, well-dressed blacks who are the "worthy" blacks fit to associate with. And there's the dream structure of constant homophobia. Those structures remain long after the specific subject matter of the programs has changed completely.

Most significantly, in terms of how these structures are implanted and the kinds of structures implanted, there's no difference between Christian television, public television, the news, sports and anything else on TV. They all function to reinforce dominant ideology through television's emotional power. Think, for example, about the dream structure of xenophobia, fear of the stranger. The Arabs are chaotic or terrorists, the Japanese will dominate our economy, we are flooded with illegal aliens, Africa and Haiti and gays are the source of AIDS. In the United States at the end of empire the government and the mass media share the same xenophobia, fear of the other, fear of losing control at the center of power.

Media activists, radicals, and feminists probably pay so little attention to Christian television because there we are depicted as the other. White feminists are immediately identified as the other—as I mentioned before—by our dress, and by almost nothing else. Our class position is identified by our external signs, and we can be flashed on Christian television as the "they" not worthy of knowing. Our image, especially when we are grouped together in public at a demonstration, promotes fear.

Television has a power to manipulate the connotative aspects of an image for emotional impact. And it resounds with all the emotional tones of the human voice, like a non-musical opera. People turn to television for that emotion, which I understand when I leave the TV playing while I do other things in the house. A radical media aesthetic may reject that aspect of television communication and reception, but what would be left? If we are honest, we will not lay the blame for the structures of manipulation at the doorsteps of Christian television producers, for, on the whole, they merely understand the parameters of their medium very well.

Since I have been making media with Nicaraguan video artists who want to have their viewers both understand and love the revolution, I neither want to make video nor participate in a political project without intense emotional engagement. In this age of information explosion, everyone has access to analyses of racism, sexism, and imperialism. It's available in the media around us. The task for radicals is to make media, especially television, that inspires people to want to know the truth and to want to analyze their own social reality, and, along with that understanding, to be inspired to act for social change. Horace called it *utile dulci*. "Mingle the useful with the sweet," he instructed, so that people will want to learn. Both we and Christian television seek to inspire people to act, but we also want people to learn, and to learn in a way that breaks down the category of the other in an ever expanding way.

*Julia Lesage is a videomaker, director of the tape Las Nicas, and coeditor of Jump Cut.*

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